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Seri Social Structure
[La Estructura social de los Seris]

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1. The material presented here was collected on a three-week visit to the Seri zone, the costs of which were defrayed by the I.N.A.H. [Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia], for the purpose of planning later investigations. It took place in January, 1952, in the company of Mr. Paul Finninger of M.C.M. [Mexico City College].

121 The permanent system of interacting influences that is presented among the Seri is of great scientific interest for its extreme characteristics of geographic isolation, environmental hostility, poverty, and the small size of the community.

131 The Seri occupy coastal territory in Sonora on the Gulf of California; formerly they covered a territory that toward the end of the 18th century, along the coast extended from Guaymas Bay, including it, to Punta Peñasco and, on the mainland, included the area in the vicinity of the present city of Hermosillo. They have been reduced little by little, now occupying only some isolated points on Cape Tepoca, Desemboque, and Tiburón Island, places from which, in spite of their inclemency, they are also being displaced.

648 Until some 30 years ago, most of the contacts of the Seri with Western culture had been warlike, ferociously defending their skins from the attacks of the yori (Mexican) invaders. Their contacts with the natives have been with the Yaqui, Papago, and those of Santa Rosalía (crossing the gulf). It was not until about 20 years ago, when the establishment of fishing camps was initiated with mestizo capital, that a new orientation in the treatment of the Seri came into being. Existing side by side with them at present are various Mexicans who exploit the products of Seri fishing, and some scientific investigators, principally from the United States.

13 They form enclaves in the heart of Aridamerica, with its cactus, shrubs and grasses, without flowing water, and with abundant flying and, especially, marine fauna.

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000 abundant flying and, especially, marine fauna.

For a modern technology, their region has great resources,
511 but for the culture of the Seri it is frankly inhospitable. The standard of living is exceedingly low, as is proclaimed by natives and foreigners and as is demonstrated by the illnesses and hunger that weaken the population.

[90] The Seri truly form part of our Western society, in
226 so far as they catch fish, with fishhooks and motorboats, to sell
439 in the markets of Hermosillo, Nogales, and Tucson, and they
[177] obtain payments in national specie and coin. The part that
182 they form, however, has its own internal structure, which regulates the relations with the environment and among its mem-
[161] bers, even though a group of 218 persons, which suffers severe alterations in percentages from disasters like the sinking of a boat or strokes of good luck like the establishment of a prosperous fishing camp, is almost insignificant for the nation.

Most probably they have never been much more numerous, and they must not have had great cohesion in the past, a situation explicable in view of their nomadic gathering economy.
621 Toward the close of the 18th century they were divided into bands, of which it is known that the most important were the Guaymas, Upanguaymas, Tepocas, Tiburones, and Salineros.
[648] They banded together at various times in order to defend themselves and to attack the nuclei of Mexicans of the zone, achieving combined action, but without effective political unity.

At present they seem to form a single group without marked
619 subdivisions, although they recognize affiliations like that of "Tiburones," "half-Papago," etc., which appear to have little real classificatory significance.

There is great uniformity: they speak a single language
184 incomprehensible to the rest of humanity; they have a relatively
619 uniform culture, and there is tribal unification for matters involving sexual exchange.

The most obvious relations are spatial; they have important
361 settlements that sprung up around the fishing establishments and are more or less permanently occupied. Of these, "El Desemboque," close to the mouth of a river from which they have been displaced, is the most important, with 80 per cent of the Seri

[90 cont.]

361 population. There is an obvious separation there between the
563 Seri and the yori, or non-Seri, with manifest differences in cultural patterns.

The yori occupy an extensive area per person; their homes are quite distant from one another, and four families in conjunction occupy a belt of land of about 100 by 50 meters.

361 The Seri are grouped by families, inhabiting minute squares of from one and a half to two meters to a side. The yori
182 feeling of prestige, based on the territorial expanse of their prop-
361 erty, contrasts with the feeling of security based on personal
511 contact that dominates many aspects of Seri life; the small size of the Seri habitation indicates, not a low standard of living, but a distinct [91] concept of comfort, according to which the Seri, having all the desert to live in, like the yori, confine themselves to the limits that personal contact permits.

In January, 1952, there were 35 dwellings, with an aver-
592 age of 4.6 persons in each, those lodging four, five, and six persons frankly predominating. Each three or four more closely related families occupied contiguous homes, forming relatively separate conjunctions by themselves, which we might call
596 macrofamilies.

The family is the basic Seri institution, which is manifest in all aspects of life: it is the center of production, co-operation, the division of labor, education, diversion, government, etc.

582 Going beyond the family and macrofamily organization,
619 we have a tribal structure based on the generalized exchange (2)
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2. Lévy Strauss, Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté [Elementary Kinship Structures], Paris, 1949.

of members for concluding marriage, by which all the Seri are actually linked by consanguinity or affinity. One is almost able to include all the members of the tribe on a single genealogical chart, systematically excluding only some few outsiders who have penetrated the group.

582 This situation, which would make one think of a primitive

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582 promiscuity of gatherers corroborative of the ideas of Morgan, is very far from being simple, tending more to confirm the ideas of Kirchoff regarding the greater restriction and regulation of marital relations in societies having a rudimentary economy. In all Seri marriages close consanguineous relatives seem to be avoided. More precisely, a classification of relatives is estab-
582 lished, from which only one group can provide a spouse. To
621 differentiate the Seri system from clan systems and marital
601 classes, in which each member belongs to a fixed class in relation to all the other members, in this system the classification varies with respect to the position of each person, that is to say, it is a true system of kinship. The factors of sex, polarity, generation, relative age, affinity, and consanguinity are involved in it, acting to deny or permit the possibility of marriage. Perhaps because of the small size of the Seri group, only within which are marriages concluded, the kinship system results in a clear identification of all persons by terms that are functions of marital relationships: approximately 50 per cent are excluded for being of the [92] same sex; 30 per cent for being of a distinct generation (very few aged or very young); the consanguineous relatives close to the affinal relatives and married persons are also excluded, leaving only so many persons as possible mates, a situation that is reflected in the kinship terminology.

582 [897] [836] It is not that sexual relations may be prohibited, for there is relative freedom in extramarital, including prenuptial, sexual relations, but the "marriage" association, sanctioned by the society and for which there is strong community pressure, has the limitations mentioned. And it tends to be realized, in spite of the disadvantages of the disappearance of sexual liberty, avoidance of near affinal relatives, and the economic obligations that begin upon the conclusion of the marriage.

156 155 With regard to individual development, this social structure is of such nature that it has well integrated cultural elements that create a very special personality, characterized by improvidence, emotional instability, inconstancy, and feelings of security, dispossession, and dependence.

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156 They are principally the result of influences that act dur-
854 ing the first years of life: constant contact of the skin with that
155 of adults; immobilization of the extremities by cloth wrappings; provision of a permanent support in the form of a cradle to which the child is fastened; constant attention to his alimentary needs, and continuous supervision of his actions.

155 "Give me bread," "give me coffee," "you have food, I
156 am hungry," "why do you keep food?" "that's the way things are," etc., are very common expressions that manifest the Seri personality.

000 On the other hand, from the practical point of view (3),

226 3. For the present fishing promoters, the
439 Seri personality is a serious obstacle: because of the wealth of marine fauna, the competent Seri obtain a good catch in a few hours, and their earnings permit them to live several days, which would be multiplied if the yori would not resort to the sale
[276] of marijuana at excessive prices to obligate them to work.

it has to be greatly altered, above all in so far as it influences the personality, in order to raise the Seri standard of living, changing their habits, ideas,and values.